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ABSTRACT

A college writing instructor used lesbian and gay fiction in three of his classes--two freshman composition classes and a science fiction class. His university accepted the instructor's right to use these materials and acknowledged students' rights to opt out of the classes after they learned the requirements of the class. The instructor viewed his role as model (being an openly gay faculty member), mentor (balancing confrontation and reassurance when raising issues of sexual identity), and as judge (weighing the quality of the students' work). In the composition classes, the readings were arranged to be more challenging as the term went on. The science fiction class was divided into three segments: biological distinctions between men and women; social and cultural distinctions between masculinity and femininity; and sexist and homophobic stereotypes. The instructor has been met with some resistance from some students. Four or five students out of 25 chose to drop the section each term, while other sections of freshman composition sections close out. Among the students who stay in the course, there are always several who are easy to remember for their overt resistance to the objectives and the materials in the course. In both semesters of the freshman composition course, three-fourths of the students wrote in comments on the course evaluation forms that the concentration on gay and lesbian issues was the least-liked aspect of the course. (RS)

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In my talk this afternoon, I want to recount my experience in using lesbian and gay fiction in three of my classes. Two of these were freshman composition classes that I taught last fall and last spring. The third is a science fiction class that I am teaching this semester.

In all three classes, I assigned a book called *Worlds Apart, an anthology of gay and lesbian science fiction and fantasy*. Its stories feature characters who are attracted to someone of the same sex; in most instances, these attractions include sexual intimacy. In the science fiction class, I also assigned four novels that feature similar characters.

While recounting my experience in these classes, I also want to consider the social and political context for this selection of reading materials. As you can imagine, freedom of expression and the possibility for censorship provide positive and negative poles for this consideration. Like the poles of a magnet, they turn this context into a force field that aligns the instructor, the class, and the students.

Simply put, my campus accepted my right to use these materials, and it acknowledged my students' right to opt out of my classes. I could require them to read stories in which two women or two men slept together. Knowing of the requirement at the outset of the class, they could drop it in favor of an alternative course or another section. As it happens in these matters, however, the simple formulation glosses

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over most of the elements that make the experience worth recounting in the first place.

Let me introduce these elements with a bit of academic history. In 1990, our university senate added "cultural diversity" to our graduation requirements. Along with race, religion, ethnicity, and gender, "sexual orientation" was included in the definition as a diversity category. The following year, I served on a university-wide task force that reviewed the status of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals as the basis for recommending that "sexual orientation" be included among the protected categories in the university's non-discrimination clause.

Subsequently, I participated in annual "diversity summits" that have focused on the need to promote the acceptance of all minorities in the classroom and across the university. Encouraged by these meetings, I proposed that my section of science fiction be taught as a diversity offering with a particular emphasis on gender and sexual orientation. The proposal was approved by our curricular chain of command: the campus, the department, and the university senate.

While the proposal was working its way through the system, I decided that I would use some of the stories that I had planned to include in the science fiction class as reading assignments for my freshman composition class. For the composition class, however, I did not propose that it be listed as a diversity course. Because I cleared this decision only with the academic director at my campus, I was able

to use these stories a year earlier than I could in the science fiction class.

In putting together the course description and syllabus for the composition class, I considered my own role, the goal of the assignments, and the nature of the students who would be registered.

My own role seemed to include three dimensions: as model, as mentor, and as judge. As a role model, I was particularly concerned with those students at our campus who were experiencing their sexuality as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The atmosphere for such students is not supportive. Surveys at University Park have indicated that our students, like most, are homophobic. When our freshmen become more aware of the existence of lesbians and gay men among their peers, they seem to feel more threatened, and the level of their hostility seems to rise.

Publicly identifying myself as a faculty member who happens to be gay, I believed, would provide some indication that being gay (or lesbian or bisexual) is all right. Such indications are in short supply. So many of my colleagues remain in situations where they perceive their sexuality as a professional liability. And I am not here today to tell them that they are wrong to feel at risk.

My experience suggests that my own decision to be "out" does alienate some of my students. The evidence remains anecdotal, but I think you can sense the tenor of it from a couple of examples. Participating on a campus panel that

discussed gender stereotypes and discrimination, I noted some parallels between sexism and homophobia. Afterwards, one of my colleagues told me of a student in his class who had dismissed the discussion by saying that there had been "no real men" on the panel. In another instance, a student who felt comfortable enough to ask me for a scholarship recommendation, told me that I was pretty much known around campus as "that faggot English prof."

Such incidents do not disconcert me. They do confirm my sense that the need for me to be "out" is a real one: the attitudes being expressed are not going to diminish if the students have even less experience of gays who are otherwise ordinary human beings.

Besides being an example, I see myself as a mentor, particularly for the majority of our students, whose socialization has left them with a range of typically negative attitudes. Acting as a mentor, requires that I balance between confrontation and reassurance. On the one hand, I want to use my personal experience to raise the issues that they need to perceive:

-- how the *value* of one's sexual identity (rather than the identity itself) is culturally determined;
-- what is damaging about the need to conceal one's sexual identity;
-- how sexual minorities are comparable to other minorities.

On the other hand, I want to reassure them that I trust their

ability to open-minded as they weigh the information and the personal perspective that I provide.

Along with my roles as model and mentor, of course, I am also an academic judge, weighing the quality of the students' work and indicating my judgments through written comments and grades. For most students, I am their first openly gay instructor. That in itself is going to provoke some anxiety, particularly when we are dealing with assignments that ask them to articulate a position on sexual minorities.

Although I accept the need for some anxiety if we are to deal with these issues at all, I try to be more reassuring than confrontational. In the composition classes, for example, I try to persuade them that the quality of their writing matters more to me than the genealogy of their beliefs. At the same time, I point out that the quality of their writing includes more than correct spelling or punctuation. It includes the ability to identify their readers, to establish some common ground, and to provide satisfactory evidence for their assertions. I think of these as centered criteria while working with marginalized materials.

Now that I have given you some perspective on myself in these classes, let me introduce more of my experience with the classes themselves as a way of providing some perspective regarding the assignments and the students. In the composition classes, the assignments were essays based on the readings. In the science fiction class, the assignments have

been essay responses to a set of questions; these are being submitted in four installments as a kind of reading journal.

In the composition classes, I arranged the readings---like the essay assignments---to be more challenging as the term went on. Among the earlier readings, I picked Edgar Pangborn's "Harper Conan and Singer David" and Elizabeth Lynn's "The Gods of Reorth," because their narratives were relatively uncomplicated and the sexuality of the principal characters was handled with restraint. However strong and true the bonds of Conan and David, for example, we read only that they kiss.

For the last assignment, I picked James Tiptree's "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" In its future world, only women have survived, and men have become "irrelevant." For male students, in particular, Tiptree's vision is not an easy one to accept.

In the science fiction class, I divided the semester into three segments. In the first, we considered the biological distinctions between men and women and looked to the readings to see how science fiction writers had worked with these distinctions. Along with three stories in *Worlds Apart*, we read John Varley's *Titan*, in which an alien species requires three partners and a two-stage mating for reproduction.

In the second segment, we considered the social and cultural distinctions between masculinity and femininity.

For this unit, we read Linda Mixon's *Glass Houses* and Maureen McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*. Mixon's protagonist, Ruby, a beer-drinking, lesbian salvage operator, uses industrial-strength robots on the job, a kind of deconstructed construction worker. McHugh's protagonist, Zhang, a beer-drinking, gay construction worker, eventually works his way to a university education as a daoist engineer.

In the final segment, we are looking at sexist and homophobic stereotypes. For this unit, we are reading Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in which a human male has to interact with an alien species, the Gethenians. Although human in appearance, each Gethenian becomes male or female only during "kemmer," a periodic phase of sexual arousal and responsiveness; at other times they are neither.

In the writing assignments and the journal questions, I have asked the students to respond to a variety of rhetorical and analytical topics. For the most part, these assignments require them to focus on the stories rather than their own experiences. I know that their own experiences will shape their responses anyway.

So I ask them to look at the characters and at the choices that the authors have made in depicting the characters. How do other characters react to Pangborn's Conan and David? What powers does Lynn attribute to the lesbian goddess in "The Gods of Reorth"? How does Mixon masculinize Ruby? How does McHugh feminize Zhang? What happens when LeGuin uses masculine pronouns throughout the story to depict

her principal Gethenian?

In responding to the students' work, I use written comments and individual conferences. In the composition class, I arranged to meet twice with each student during the semester. In the first meeting, I focused on their progress in the course; I used it as an opportunity to ask them if they were having any problems in dealing with the material. In the second meeting, we looked at their preliminary work for their final assignment.

After three semesters of using lesbian and gay science fiction, I can share the following observations about my experience and that of my students. Although I am fortunate to have an administration that has supported my right to use these works in my classes, my colleagues' concerns are, for the most part, focused elsewhere. One of my faculty friends questioned whether I needed to be "out" at all. Another sought reassurance that the works I was assigning were of sufficient quality to merit their use. More positively, I have been invited to speak of my experiences as a gay male in several psychology classes.

Among my students, who are not yet as well educated or as cosmopolitan, my efforts have met with somewhat greater resistance. In the composition classes, four to five students out of twenty-five chose to drop my section each term once they saw the text and the writing assignments. While their departure blessed me with fewer papers to grade, the number of drops was higher than usual for a course that all

our students are required to take. Ordinarily, our freshmen composition sections close out. In the fall semester, several of these drops were propelled by parental pressure.

In the science fiction class, five of the original twenty who had enrolled decided to drop. Since the course is only one among a dozen or so that can be used to fulfill a humanities requirement, these students should not have had much difficulty enrolling in a comparable course.

Among the students who have stayed in these courses, several are easy to remember for their resistance to the objectives and the materials in the class. In the fall semester, one student---call him Mark---would support his analysis of the stories with Biblical condemnations of sodomy. During our first conference, he indicated that his parents, both born-again Christian ministers, had urged him to drop the class. Although he began with some serious syntax problems, he worked his way up to a B-minus by the end of the term.

In the spring semester, another student---call him John ---insisted that gays were not a problem for him because he never thought about them, never talked about them, and did not know any. He was pretty sure, however, that they did not deserve any special privileges. Unfortunately, his writing skills were weaker than Mark's, and he was less able to improve them over a fifteen-week term.

This semester, a third student---call him Matt---has been more overt in rejecting the diversity issues that are the focus of the science fiction class. Regarding one set of

journal questions, he refused to explore the implications of sexuality or gender in the readings and indicated that he thought such questions were a waste of time.

In my response to his answers, I acknowledged that sexuality and gender were not the only features worth examining in these texts, but I reminded him that I had devised the course to focus on these issues. I invited him to meet with me, if he found it difficult to pursue this focus. Fortunately for both of us, he has been a valued participant in our class discussions and he has been able to earn a B and a B-plus on his tests.

While students like Mark, John, and Matt have been more overt in their resistance to the objectives, I think their attitudes are probably close to the norm for the students, particularly the male students, who have stayed with these classes each semester. In the space for written comments on our course evaluation sheets, we ask the students to identify what they like least about the course. In both semesters of freshman composition, the concentration on gays and lesbians was cited by three-quarters of the students. Not surprisingly, the proportion was somewhat higher in the spring when the course enrolled only two women. The numerical evaluations of the courses are also slightly lower than they have been in semesters when I have taught freshman composition with other readings.

When I decided to introduce these materials in my classes, I assumed that my students would be more likely than not

to resist them. As one campus administrator pointed out to me when I interviewed for the job, "Joe, this area is pretty conservative." I do not expect to transform my students' attitudes any time soon.

In that potential resistance, however, I find one of the more compelling reasons for taking this initiative. For if I can make this effort and do not, who---I ask---would make it in my stead?